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MUSIC OF THE MONTH

YOUNG ITALY AND YOUNG AMERICA

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

THE Young Lions of contemporary music have been prowling about the jungles of the metropolis with increasing boldness of late. They hail from no particular clime, these redoubtable creatures—Malipiero and Respighi and De Sabata and Pizzetti are of the Italian breed; Arnold Bax and Cyril Scott are Britannic; Ernest Bloch is Swiss-American. One—Charles Griffes—honored Elmira, N. Y., by being born there; and he, alas, has been amongst us of late only as a brave and puissant wraith: for Griffes died last Spring, just as the reasons for his living had begun to seem clearly beyond argument.

Some of those reasons were made manifest at a January concert of the lamented Boston Symphony Orchestra in New York, when Griffes' *Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan* was set beside a work of the far more eminent Malipiero on the same programme. Now, G. Francesco Malipiero is among the most distinguished of contemporary music-makers. He is one of the adventurous Young Italian School, an aesthetic rebel, a mystic, a poet and visionary. But though an ultra-modernist, he is to be scrupulously distinguished from the blatant futurists of Signor Pratella's type. Malipiero is of the subtler and more fastidious clan of Casella, Respighi, Tommasini, De Sabata—of those who (it might be said with rough truth) have listened to Ravel and Stravinsky and found them good, but have mixed in with their love of contemporary musical France and Russia a lurking affection for Richard Strauss, and have even cast a furtive glance toward Schönberg and the Hungarians. They profess to strive after "simplicity, architectural sobriety, sturdiness and firmness of line, familiar vivacity, curious sensuality constantly on the *qui vive*—the classical qualities of the Italian spirit"; and to realize this admirable ideal

they established at Rome in 1917—these young Latin music-makers on the optimistic side of middle-age—the “Italian Society of Modern Music.”

Malipiero, son of a pianist and grandson of a composer (Francesco Malipiero, writer of operas), took up the violin at six and longed to be a painter. As a young man he studied composition under Enrico Bossi at Venice; was thrilled by a performance of *Die Meistersinger*; transcribed old scores by Monteverde, Scarlatti, Cavalli; followed Bossi to Bologna, and heard there in 1904 his first orchestral work, a symphonic poem, *Dai Sepolchri*. From 1906 to 1910, Malipiero “freed himself of the Wagnerian influence,” married, heard Richard Strauss in Germany, composed an opera, symphonic works, chamber-music, songs. In 1913 he went to Paris, was introduced by Casella to Ravel, and steeped himself in music by Stravinsky, Debussy, Dukas. In January, 1914, he witnessed at Rome the failure of his opera *Canossa*, and returned to Venice.

Prevented by ill-health from taking part in the War, Malipiero was overwhelmed by the huge calamity, and by a tragedy that afflicted his private life. He composed under its influence the sombre and terrible *Pause del Silenzio* (to which “one is unable to listen without awe and horror”) and the *Ditirambo tragico*. It is said that he is now, materially, in sore straits.

Malipiero has produced abundantly—operas, ballets, symphonic poems, suites, a string quartet, a 'cello sonata, piano pieces, songs. He is alleged to reverence “the purest traditions of the great Italian school of the XVIIth century,” and apparently shares in the amusing scramble of the ultra-moderns to get in under the sacred umbrella of “classicism.”

It was the first series of his two-part suite, *Impressioni dal Vero*, that Mr. Monteux placed on the same Boston Symphony programme with the *Kubla Khan* of Griffes. Three months earlier, Mr. Bodanzky had played the second series of *Impressioni* at a National Symphony Concert, for the first time in America. The two parts of the work are arranged as follows:

PART I.—*Il Capinero* (“The Blackcap”); *Il Piccio* (“The Woodpecker”); *Il Chiu* (“The Owl”).

PART II.—*Colloquio di Campane* (“Dialogue of the Bells”);

I Cipressi e il Vento ("The Cypresses and the Wind"); *Baldoria Campestre* ("Rustic Festival").

The first set is dated 1910-1911, the second set 1914-1915. The latter pieces were heard in 1917 at Rome, where they "created an uproar" and "raised violent controversies."

Part I of the *Impressioni* illustrates, according to M. Henri Prunières, the composer's love of "the woods and its winged hosts." The first movement, *Il Capinero* ("The Blackcap") "evokes the song of the warbler, the rustling of the leaves, all the atmosphere of the forest in its autumnal mourning."

The second movement, *Il Picchio* ("The Woodpecker"), "unfolds itself in a rapid movement. It is the forest *en fête*, with the rays of the sun filtering through the branches, the fluttering of birds in the trees, while the woodpecker with his powerful beak searches persistently in the mildewed trunks of the oaks."

The third movement, *Il Chiù* ("The Owl"), is "a nocturne full of poetry and contemplation."

The second series of the *Impressioni* disclose in their style, according to M. Prunières, the evolution of Malipiero (he had become familiar, in the interval between the two parts of the work, with the music of Stravinsky, Ravel, Debussy). "The harmonies are more dissonant, the rhythms more subtle, the instrumentation achieves an admirable plentitude. . . ."

In the first movement, *Colloquio di Campane* ("Dialogue of the Bells"), "the metallic voices rise in the light air; they are melted in veiled sonority as they are hushed one by one, while silence descends on the peaceful country."

"The second movement, *I Cipressi e il Vento* ("The Cypresses and the Wind") is a fantastic vision: impressions of night beneath the cypress trees. Agitated and twisted by the wind, they seem suddenly to dance a frenzied round."

The third movement, *Baldoria Campestre* ("Rustic Festival"), "depicts, with intention to caricature, a rustic fête, rough, brutal and tumultuous, with gruff peasants who amuse themselves in their own way. A powerful rhythm outlines their gestures and their dances."

M. Prunières believes that one would judge wrongly these

impressions of Nature "in attributing to them tendencies toward realistic and objective description. The tone-poet troubles himself little to reconstruct literally the sounds of the forest: he seeks rather to arouse in the mind of the listener the musical impression which he himself one day felt in listening to the confidence of the woods peopled with birds." Hear also M. G. Jean-Aubry: "He pictures in the first set three birds, their character, their surroundings, without resorting to the procedures of imitative music, but by a subtle portraiture of their atmosphere and their attitude; and he does this with an immediately engaging grace and delicacy of touch. In the second set, the aspects become broader, and human emotion forcibly manifests itself. In *The Cypresses and the Wind*, he paints not only Nature, but the emotions engendered by Nature in the breast of a poet. In the *Dialogue of the Bells*, Malipiero diverts himself with audacious sound combinations, as he does with rhythms in the last movement, *Rustic Festival*; both pieces, especially the first, bear the stamp of his own enjoyment."

Now all this is true enough, and we have not a word to say against it. But neither Mr. Monteux nor Mr. Bodanzky before him succeeded in persuading us that Signor Malipiero has enriched the treasury of art by these celebrated examples of musical modernity. To tell the truth, this is a very tame lion indeed at whose growl we are expected to tremble. Signor Malipiero knows how to handle an orchestra—but a dozen other living composers can do that quite as well as he. Also, he is a poetic soul, and his suite contains some charming and illusive pages. But as musical ultra-modernism it is very tame and tepid indeed—it lacks pith, and bite, and edge, and saliency. Signor Malipiero's invention is singularly feeble—so far as one may judge by this work. It seems to us that most of these Young Italians, when they are not remembering Debussy and Stravinsky and Strauss, are wanting in tonal character. Casella is the strongest of the group, and his *Notte di Maggio* contains superb pages.

Now let us consider Charles Griffes, who was placed beside Malipiero upon Mr. Monteux's January programme—and we shall forget, for the moment, that Griffes happened to be an American, since chauvinism in art is the stupidest of vices.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes had a delicate perception of mortal ironies, both humorous and tragical. He was a poet with a sense of comedy. And he was that most occasional of miracles, an artist who sincerely undervalued his own contributions to the cosmos. Those who knew him well will remember his casual attitude toward his work. Nor was this self-depreciation a pose. Griffes had never learned how to pose—he would never have learned how, if he had lived to be as triumphantly old and famous as Monsieur Saint-Saëns or Herr Bruch or Signor Verdi. One imagines that Griffes would be profoundly astonished if he could witness the flood of appreciative tributes unloosed by his death. And it is possible that his astonishment might be tinged with that gentle irony which never deserted him for long. For though the remarkable work that he was doing had won, while he was still alive, the recognition of a few among that “acute and honorable minority” whose approval is all that a genuinely fine-grained artist really cares about, it is deplorably true that Griffes had scarcely begun to reap the reward—spiritual or material—that was his due. Had he been endowed with the priceless instinct for publicity,—that knack of tempting the shy radiance of the limelight which is God’s most precious gift to the American genius,—he might perhaps have won an encouragement and a leisure that would have nourished an extensive contribution to his country’s art. But he lacked that excellent and indispensable trait, and so he was obliged to divert the greater part of his time and his energy to activities that were merely utilitarian and sustaining. He must needs instruct youthful mediocrity to afflict the world, while those subtle fantasies of beauty that haunted his imagination were set aside for a more propitious hour, or became, it might be, fugitive and irrecoverable.

And so he went on to his piteously premature end. It was only a short while before his death that the Boston Orchestra played for the first time his *Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*,—an early work, composed in 1912,—and the general concert-going public turned aside for a moment from its excited twitterings over the visible divinities of music to bestow an approving hand upon this producer of a distinguished and imaginative tone-poetry who was, by some mysterious accident, an American.

A few months later, Griffes was dead;—he succumbed to the after-effects of influenza on April 8, 1920; and in the latest biographical dictionary of musicians—an American publication—you will find no mention of his name, though a hundred mediocrities strut through its pages in all their be-medalled pride.

Francis Thompson in his incomparable essay on Shelley writes with savage bitterness of those who supposed that Shelley might have found consolation for his neglect in “that sensitive superstition, the applause of posterity. Posterity! which goes to Rome, weeps large-sized tears, carves beautiful inscriptions over the tomb of Keats; and the worm must wriggle her curt say to it all, since the dead poet, wherever he be, has quite other gear to tend.” A poet, said Thompson, “must to some extent be a chameleon, and feed on air. But it need not be the musty breath of the multitude. He can find his needful support in the judgment of those whose judgment he knows valuable.”

Those who have listened to *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*, and to Griffes' later works, will not find it easy to miss the blended power and delicacy of this music. How puissant and memorable—how truly imaginative—is the opening of *Kubla Khan*—that “vague, foggy beginning” which (as he said) “describes the sacred river, running ‘through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea.’” The music of this section, and of the whole of the symphonic poem, has a sustained vigor, a richness of fantasy, an individuality of modelling, which—even when it is reminding us of Debussy and Loeffler and other great modernists—yet contributes something of its own to the discourse: something native and revelatory. It is far better music—*quâ* music—than anything of Signor Malipiero's which we have heard; and this is perhaps worth testifying to.

Those who are aware of the work that Griffes was doing must now, alas, content themselves with enacting their futile rituals of appreciation; remembering that here was a music-maker who spoke his own thoughts, who looked out upon the world from a hilltop that he himself had discovered, where the winds were burdened with a strange and fantastic music, bearing rumors of festivals and dances from exotic groves and legendary shores.

He was a fastidious craftsman, a scrupulous artist. He was neither smug nor pretentious nor accommodating. He went his own way,—modestly, quietly, unswervingly. Having the vision of the few, he had treasured, perhaps, that discourse of Plato's upon Beauty: "It is not like any face or hands or bodily thing; it is not in something else, neither living thing, nor earth nor heaven; only by itself in its own way in one form it for ever is."

That conviction may have sustained him in more than one downcast hour. It cannot equally solace us; for we remember that the gift of eloquent and salient speech is an unpredictable event, obeying that baffling law of rhythmical occurrence whose comprehension, declares the subtlest of modern essayists, we may not know; for it flits upon an orbit that is mysteriously curved, "keeping no man knows what trysts with time."

Listening to this music that he has left us, we can only say, as it was said in other years and to another memory,—“Here are the broken airs that once you loved. They are but the breath of what has been: only are they for this, that they do the will of beauty and regret.”

LAWRENCE GILMAN.